

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN THOMAS E. PETRI
HIGHWAY, TRANSIT AND PIPELINES
SUBCOMMITTEE
HEARING ON**

**Celebrating 50 Years: The Eisenhower
Interstate Highway System**

June 27, 2006

Good afternoon. This Subcommittee hearing will come to order.

I want to welcome all of our Members and our witnesses to today's hearing, "Celebrating 50 Years: The Eisenhower Interstate Highway System". And since this is a celebration, we're going to celebrate with cake immediately following today's hearing. I invite you all to stay and enjoy some cake in honor of the interstate's 50 years.

The purpose of today's hearing is to provide Members of the Committee with a brief history of the interstate, its impact on American culture, and the future of the system.

On Thursday, June 29th, the interstate highway system will celebrate its 50th anniversary. In 1956, after much planning and compromise, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act creating the interstate highway system, a project which transformed American life forever.

As our country entered the 20th Century, good roads, even paved roads, were not common. Plans for a national system of expressways were developed in 1944 by the National Highway Committee.

Congress designated the 40,000-mile National System of Interstate Highways in 1944, but funding would not be authorized until 1952, when President Harry Truman signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1952 offering a token down payment of \$25 million for the Interstates. However, it would be up to the next president -- President Dwight David Eisenhower -- to lead the campaign for the nation's interstate system.

President Eisenhower made it a keystone of his domestic agenda when he was elected to office in 1953. President Eisenhower envisioned a new tax-based financing plan, with the federal government bearing the largest share of construction costs.

Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act without fanfare in a hospital room at Walter Reed Army Medical Center where he was recovering from illness.

Today, Americans continue to reap the benefits of that legislation. The wide, relatively straight roadways in the interstate highway system were designed to be faster and safer than the two-lane roads that preceded them. In fact, the interstate system is the safest road system in the country -- with a fatality rate of 0.8, compared to 1.44 for all roads in 2004.

The interstate system, which accounts for only one percent of the Nation's total road mileage but carries over 24% of the Nation's traffic, has come to be taken for granted. Yet, the interstate has become woven into the fabric of American life. In 2004, Americans traveled about 267 billion vehicle miles on the rural interstate roads, 26 billion vehicle miles on the "small urban" interstate roads, and over 434 billion vehicle miles on the urbanized interstate roads. Chances are that almost everyone in this room traveled here by interstate at some point in their journey.

We have invited two panels of witness today. On our first panel we welcome Mr. Richard Capka, Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration. Mr. Capka's testimony will explain how the interstate came about through President Eisenhower's determination for a national road and the impact the interstate has made on American daily life.

Our second panel includes Dr. Jonathon Gifford, a professor of Public Management and Policy at George Mason University; Dr. Tom Lewis, an English professor at Skidmore College and author of Divided Highways, a book dedicated to the creation of the highway and what its impact has been on American life; and finally, Mr. Gene McCormick, Chairman of the American Road & Transportation Builders Association.

I will now yield to Mr. DeFazio for his opening statements.